

STRATEGIES FOR FIGHTING THE BUDGET CUTS

BROADENING ISSUE COALITIONS - Give up some of your personal issues to join with others in the long term fight.

Saturday, May 9th, will be the beginning of some new, long term community organizing goals. For years, low income people and their advocates have been building specific, issue defined coalitions in local communities throughout the country. A lot of these groups have been successful in negotiating with people who share common concerns and goals.

The main reason people get together in coalitions is to create change of some sort. People usually feel the need to join a coalition because they want to find a way to bring about change, to influence a program they care about and to generally improve the quality of their life.

Many times these efforts are short term activities to resolve one particular situation and the coalition dissolves after it accomplishes its goal. In some cases, the organization remains intact to take on different issues that require group action to be most effective.

The current administration is proposing devastating budget cuts in all the social programs that affect the necessities of life-- housing, food, health care, transportation, jobs, education, energy. It is clear that single social issue coalitions can no longer wage isolated fights for their own programs without jeopardizing other equally important life sustaining needs. In addition, each coalition will bring the educational merits of their own issue to a broader based approach through such alliances. We must pull ourselves together, community by community, to form broad based, long term alliances that can produce a unity of purpose. People need to support each other in this fight and go beyond any single issue to the recognition that each human being has a right to the necessities of life--they are not a privilege to be given to somebody but rather a right of citizenship.

The opposition is counting on pitting one social program against another; one group against another. All the coalitions that are anyway deal with social issues affecting low income, poor and working people must join together for the long haul: housing, labor, food, health, small business, education, energy, transportation, small farmers, legal aid, church and religious groups, handicapped, child care, senior citizens, minority. (See enclosed Reagan Recovery)

People will have to give up going outside their normal organizational boundaries and form these alliances with other active

groups to repudiate the attack on funding for the necessities of life for those in need of assistance.

In forming broad based alliances, think about the following:

Analyze Your Community: What coalitions or groups already exist that are working on programs that will be affected by the cuts? What is the economy and job market like? You need to gather the data and statistics on how the cuts will affect people in your community and show people how they can challenge the cuts. What is the political climate in your community? (Refer to piece on local data gathering)

Define Your Issues: Find common denominators to bring people together around the cuts. People join coalitions because they think they have something to contribute and they have something to gain -- self-interest is the motivating factor and you have to show how people will be better off if they work with you rather than without you.

Develop Strategies With Imagination: You must have specific actions that people can participate in. You need some short term successes to help build long term goals. The issues need to be immediate, specific and realizable. People must have something they can do that is action oriented.

Be Flexible In Your Networking: Change strategies where you need to try new ideas and allow people to initiate their own efforts while coordinating the overall work.

Maintenance Of Individual Coalitions: Each coalition will want to maintain its own operation and independence. The alliance is for the sole purpose of maintaining membership strengths and influence and for developing coordinated action. No one has to give up any power. They only have to combine their power to help fight the cuts.

EDUCATING THE PUBLIC, LOCAL AND STATE ELECTED OFFICIALS

The total impact of the proposed cuts in all the social programs is not fully understood by the majority of Americans. The situation is similar to what happened in California a few years ago, when Proposition 13 was on the ballot. Voters were told that if they supported Proposition 13 to reduce spending for certain services (like social services) that their property taxes would be reduced. They supported the proposition and a lot of services were cut--recreation, vocational education, libraries, social services--but their property taxes did not go down. People did not understand

what the proposition would do and who it would hurt. They were misled about tax relief. Californians may have wanted property tax relief, but they also wanted their public libraries and playgrounds after school. They got neither.

The public must be educated about what the proposed cuts in the Reagan budget will mean to their daily lives. Local and state elected officials need to be told how the cuts will impact on local services and affect programs in their communities. This public education can be accomplished through the media, community meetings, by canvassing neighborhoods, and distributing flyers at public gathering places. There is need for constant reinforcement of the message. This is not a one shot effort. (See enclosed materials on public meetings and the media.)

In addition, it is very important to have personal meetings with local and state elected officials. They need to be told immediately how the cuts will hurt local people and how the local governments will be expected to make up the losses in federal revenue. You need to explain how the concept of "block grants", which is being held out as a better way for states and localities to provide services, is really going to reduce severely the amount of federal money a state will get for the administration of social programs. How will the states and localities make up the losses? How will they serve all the people who are on the programs which are being cut if their own state and local budgets cannot meet these needs?

POLITICAL ACTION

This is an ongoing political fight. Votes have already been held on some of the budget cuts and will continue through the summer. These budget battles will be with us for the next several years and low income and working people need to get active right now in electoral politics in their own community.

All members of the House of Representatives are up for re-election next year, and one-third of the Senate. There needs to be ongoing voter registration drives in all localities to register people who support full funding for social programs. Elected officials respond best to one thing--getting elected (or re-elected) and that means the power of the vote of the ballot box.

Over and over you hear from Congresspeople and other elected officials that they want to know what the voters in their "own district" or community think about the cuts. The powerful message to any person who is elected to office is that you are a voter and you will hold him or her accountable for their position and votes on issues of concern to you. The most powerful message is that you do vote every time there is an election.

Voter registration drives are ongoing projects that should be done all year, not just two months before election time. Door-to-door canvassing in neighborhoods where low income and working people live to find out who is registered (or you can get a voter registration list and canvass the unregistered homes); presentations at meetings about the need to register; assistance provided for transportation and babysitting to help people register; public service messages on how to register and other community activities need to be ongoing.

You need to constantly work with legislators who support your efforts and provide them with the information and volunteers they need to stay in office. You need to thank them for their support and continue to stay in touch, even when there isn't a burning issue before them. They need to hear from you all the time, even if only to let them know you are still active in their community. Ongoing political forums that raise issues throughout the year are necessary to keep both the public and the legislators informed about issues. In addition, constant information on how social programs are helping people in the community is desperately needed. It is not enough to just pull out all your statistics on how many people have been helped by a particular program when the crisis over how a legislator will vote is about to happen. Positive stories, personal testimony and relevant information on how programs operate, who they help, and how people benefit from all of the social programs should be ongoing organizing activities.

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LETTERWRITING CAMPAIGNS

Letter writing campaigns are important, but a lot of legislators rarely read their own mail. They are, however, legged, created and reported to the legislator and some letters actually get to him/her. These are used to prepare speeches, ask questions and make arguments in committee. They give your legislator the arguments and concrete examples they need to make a case for particular programs. Any volume of mail is taken seriously. Letters from individuals need not be typed. They just need to relate the person's own thoughts, experiences and observations. They will be much less effective if they are "carboned", using the same words as every other letter on the subject.

Letters from organizations and individuals familiar with the issues should include both factual and personal experiences.

Start by doing a very simple, one-page fact sheet on the impact of the cuts in your area. Type people to write their members of Congress in their own words to express their anger over the proposed cuts. Be sure to include the addresses of all your legislators.

Hundreds of letters can be generated, if you:

--Use all meetings as an opportunity to write letters; pass out copies of a fact sheet and provide assorted writing paper and envelopes, then mail the letters over the next few days. Get all your key contacts to organize letter writing at their meetings.

--Organize letter writing socials; where people drop into a community center or someone's home to write letters and socialize. Make sure all your sympathetic friends and relatives write, too.

--Set up letter writing tables at logical points: senior centers, public housing developments, daycare centers, Sunday after church, banks when social security checks are cashed, meetings of service clubs, union halls, outside work places, colleges--wherever you think sympathetic people gather.

--Ask churches to have a "letter offering" one Sunday, where everyone contributes a letter to the offering.

Compared to individual letters, neither petitions nor pre-printed post cards have much influence. Fifty individual letters will have much more influence than 400 preprinted post cards or names on a petition. Petitions are most useful as a way to get media coverage by presenting a bulky pile to the legislator in front of a TV camera.

MEETINGS WITH CONGRESSIONAL REPRESENTATIVES

Face to face meetings are essential. A group meeting of organizations shows you are all together. But individual meetings show a real commitment to the cause. Organize a steady flow of visits to your members when they are in their home district, as well as to see their staff in the district offices.

MEETING POINTERS

1. Call the local office for an appointment. Many legislators go home every weekend, and Congress has frequent recesses which allow members to work in their home offices.
2. Keep group meetings down to 4-8 people who show the broad-based representation of your group.
3. Have a "prep meeting" to discuss the issues, who will present issues and questions you want to ask. Plan for no more than 15 minutes.
4. Write an agenda and give a copy to the legislator or staff person at the start of the meeting, or mail it ahead of time.
5. Have one person act as informal chair of the group to open the subject and refer to others for presentations.
6. Have your information organized and well prepared. Make your pitch concisely. Leave behind a 1-2 page fact sheet.
7. Listen to questions and answer them accurately. If you don't know an answer, say you will get back in writing and then do so.
8. If your legislator evades the subject, bring it up again until you get an answer to your question.
9. If he/she is on your side, make sure he/she knows how much it means to the people of their district.
10. Press for a firm commitment of support. Find out what they will do to advance your position.
11. Each organization in the group should send a follow-up letter, cover questions unanswered in the meeting, restate its position and restate any commitment that was received from the legislator.

Grab a moment with your legislators. All legislators go back to their districts frequently, many every weekend. Much of

CITIZEN ACTION TEACH-INS

Educating people to what the budget cuts in social programs really mean to their daily lives is an important organizing tool for fighting the cuts. Holding local teach-ins is one good way to share information, stimulate discussion and set strategies for opposing the cuts.

Teach-ins can take the form of debates, panel discussions, main speakers, audience question and answer periods, or any combination of these formats. A key element is to make the teach-in a real learning experience, which is interesting and productive for all who participate. You can show films, have displays, literature tables, and pot luck lunches to make the day diversified for everyone attending. Plan to have child care services available so people can attend with their children.

The main teach-in efforts should be directed towards:

-- CHALLENGING the "myth" that the proposed budget cuts in social programs will help reduce inflation, unemployment and balance the budget.

-- EXPLAINING how these budget cuts hurt low income and working people the most.

-- DETAILING how much money your local communities will lose through the cuts and guessing how city and county governments will make up the losses to meet people's needs for assistance in the necessities of housing, food, energy, health care, job training and education.

-- EXAMINING alternative budget proposals which do not attack programs providing assistance for the necessities of life.

SOME TIPS FOR ORGANISING A LOCAL TEACH-IN

Setting: The room should be centrally located and/or near well-travelled thoroughfares, such as student unions of colleges, downtown churches, YMCAs', union halls, town halls, and gyms. The room should be adequate for the number of people expected, and be well-lighted as well as easily darkened for film showings. Don't hold the teach-in in a Madison Square Garden if you expect 100 people to attend; your event will look like a flop, even if you're delighted with the turnout.

Promsity: Have your advertising posters up a week in advance. If possible, try for two types of posters; one promoting key speakers and events, the other listing all participants and events by time and topic.

their time is spent at public meetings, openings, fundraisers, fairs and other events where they can mingle with the voters. Call the legislator's nearest local office, find out when he or she will be home and what's on the schedule. Then be sure supporters go to many of these events, corner their legislator to express their concern and ask directly for his/her support. These "quickie" conversations are one of the best ways to get directly to your legislator.

Get announcements to the local media in time for them to announce the teach-in during the week before, and especially the day before and day of the event. Have the teach-in announced in classes (leaflet faculty mailboxes), leaflet factories, shopping centers, church bulletins.

Participants: Get a good, broad cross-section of speakers and panelists--people who are receiving benefits from social programs and can personally testify to the need for the programs; people who can explain (simply) the reasons the proposed cuts hit hardest at those least able to afford such cuts, and how the cuts will not stop inflation, balance the budget and increase productivity; people who are active in the community with special constituencies who are fighting the cuts and people who are supporting the cuts (such as the Chamber of Commerce) so you hear what the opposition is saying and refute these arguments; local elected officials and program administrators who can speak about the effort on the local economy and people from all walks of life that can help you build an alliance--small businessmen, small family farmers, labor and working people, senior citizens, clergy and church members, students and youth.

Timing: Try to schedule well-known or dynamic speakers in front of less visible or assisting speakers. If you have a celebrity, have them give a "keynote address" and use it to build publicity.

There should be at least one featured speaker or event for the morning, afternoon, and evening portion of the teach-in depending on the length of the teach-in. Arrange a fund-raiser as part of the evening's events if there's enough energy.

Tempo: Vary the type and tempo of the day's events. Mix rhetoric with straightforward (but interesting) information, combine depressing fact-givers with speakers on upbeat alternatives (someone talking about the local co-op or worker-owned business, for example), and spice the day with films, panel discussions, debates, entertainers, etc.

Make sure all speakers are present 15 minutes before they're due to go on. One of the worst things that can happen to a teach-in is a ten or fifteen minute lull between events where the audience is left waiting and wondering what's going on (they'll often leave). To avoid this, it's a good idea to: (1) Set up a short film that can be shown at any time; (2) Have the moderator prepare a short speech or other interesting filler to keep the audience's attention while you wait for the delayed speaker.

Food, Literature, Entertainment: Every teach-in needs diversions (that don't conflict with the main events) for wandering minds.

There should be a side table of food and beverages, preferably homemade, for sale to teach-in participants.

Contact local bookstores for consignment sales of books on issues relevant to the teach-in. Also, many churches or Friends' meetings have social justice reading lists or books for sale, and may be willing to have someone staff a table.

Find socially conscious performers to do 15-minute skits during the day's events. Try to get people who can set up quickly and can "warm up" the audience.

Note: The teach-in need not run the entire day. Better to do a half-day, high energy affair for three hours than stretch the same events into a full day-long activity. Make it fun for everyone. (See Design Inventory)

SAMPLE AGENDA FOR A LOCAL TEACH-IN

- Opening Panel: Budget Cuts in the Necessities of Life-what Do They Mean to You and Your Community?
- ENERGY** -- Local representative of a citizen-labor energy coalition;
consumer advocates before the state utility commission; local gas station owner.
- HEALTH CARE** -- Medicaid client;
health clinic staff person; senior citizen.
- FOOD** -- Food stamp client;
local grocery store owner; small farmer.
- HOUSING** -- Representative of tenant's group;
small homeowner.
- EDUCATION** -- Working mother of a day care youngster;
student at a vocational education school;
handicapped person.
- JOB TRAINING** -- Laid off worker;
unemployed youth; owner of a local industry.
- NY State and Local Budgets Will Be Affected:

State legislator; representative of the Governor,
member of the local city or town council,
local congressman or a staff person, administrator of local social service programs.

(over)

QUESTION: Who Is To Blame For Inflation, High Unemployment,
High Gasoline Prices, etc.?

Environmentalists and/or union representative
and/or friendly elected official

OR:

Chamber of commerce representative and/or
large corporate executive and/or elected of-
ficial supporting cuts

Organizing To Fight Inflation and Budget Cuts:

Representatives from:
local labor council;
citizen coalitions (food
stamps, child nutrition, environment)
tenant's organization;
consumer group;
small business community;
rural and farm group;
alternatives (cooperatives);
church congregations;
friendly agency and governmental workers;
supportive elected officials.

(Taken from Big Business Day, Ralph Nader's Public Citizen;
CCIM-Consumers Opposed to Inflation in Necessities; Community
Nutrition Institute)

ACTION IDEAS

--Empty Paper Plates: You can do several different actions with the empty plate idea. Send in empty plates to your Congressman or Senator; collect empty plates at a meeting or rally, with a hand written message from each commitment on the plate and bag the plates up and deliver them to your representative's home office; you can also have people staple their utility, rent or mortgage, medical, food receipt, gas, and other essential bills to an empty plate. (If you can, get people to also attach a copy of their voter registration card to the empty plate. It will have a lot more significance!)

--Hold a food stamp allotment breakfast or lunch at a local church or school cafeteria to illustrate what people can eat when they are on a food stamp diet. If you use a school cafeteria, show what the cuts in the school lunch program will mean. Use candles instead of the electric lights to show how energy cuts will hurt people.

--Hold a walking tour of a low income neighborhood and then a tour of your Congressman's neighborhood. Have people holding candles, empty grocery bags, or anything that illustrates the cuts.

--Distribute leaflets at shopping centers explaining the cuts and then hold a mini-rally in the parking lot with speakers talking about the cuts. (Get permission first from the shopping center management.)

--Hold a march through town to a public facility that will lose funds if cuts are made (vocational training center, day care center).

--Use a school yard for a picnic, serving food stamp allotment meals. Have people illustrate each of the cuts in the necessities with a game of charades or through short plays.

--Send in extra tax forms to Congress with copies of your weekly bills attached.

--Visit your representative at their home at meal time and offer to share their meal...You bring the equivalent of a food stamp meal and offer to exchange meals.

--Hold simultaneous press conferences all over the state on the cuts (use fishing nets with holes to show the "safety" net fallacy).

--Hold public hearings in the town council chambers; at the state capital in one of the legislative chambers. If you

cannot get a legislative facility, hold the hearings in a public school or church. Get favorable state legislators to hold legislative hearings. Invite legislators, Congress-people and other elected officials to the hearings. Have empty chairs for those who do not show up. Label their chairs with their name tags.

--Ring church bells all over the city or county to sound the alarm that the cuts are coming unless you stop them. Have people gathered in church yards for prayer vigils.

--Hold prayer vigils outside legislators homes, home district offices, public facilities: anywhere that would emphasize that you are praying that your message will be heard.

--Bread lines--In front of a local bank that redlines in the community, invests the smallest percentage of its (your) money in your community, or has other regressive investment policies: line up to take your "bread" out of your account at that bank. Ask for it in small bills or coins so you and the scores of others who join you will have an effective visual for a press photo.

--Mock trial--Hold a mock trial of a corporate shamer. Den-
 -case them in "moral bankruptcy." Street theatre will help to get the message across. Black hats, papier mache heads and other props make vivid visual points.

--People's tour--Coordinate a "People's Tour" around your town, with knowledgeable guides pointing out corporate head-
 -quarters and describing the unsavory business activities en-
 -gaged in there. Point out historical sites of factory sit-ins, demonstrations, etc.

--Salary Grab--Publish the salary figures of your congressional delegation; of corporate executives in the community. Compare these salaries with those of blue collar workers, low income people, average working people.

--Corporate Hall of Shame--Open a Corporate Hall of Shame exhibit on the courthouse square or at a central place in town with exhibits on the activities of big business on the local and national level, plus alternative exhibits of co-ops, worker-owned industry, solar greenhouses.

--Shadow Office of Budget Management--Set up a watchdog committee composed of representatives of your local coalition to graphically demonstrate alternative budget proposals.

--(Taken from Big Business Day Action Ideas, Ralph Nader's Public Citizen)